

Message Text

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ACTION NEA-10

INFO OCT-01 EUR-12 ISO-00 CIAE-00 DODE-00 PM-04 H-02

INR-07 L-03 NSAE-00 NSC-05 PA-01 PRS-01 SP-02 SS-15

USIA-06 OMB-01 ACDA-07 SAM-01 IO-13 /091 W

----- 066861

P R 081052Z JUL 76

FM AMEMBASSY BEIRUT

TO SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 998

INFO AMEMBASSY AMMAN

AMEMBASSY CAIRO

AMEMBASSY DAMASCUS

AMEMBASSY JIDDA

AMEMBASSY LONDON

AMEMBASSY PARIS

AMEMBASSY TEL AVIV

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 1 OF 2 BEIRUT 5991

E.O. 11652: GDS

TAGS: PINS, PINT, PFOR, LE

SUBJECT: CONVERSATION WITH ABDULLAH HAFI, SUNNI POLITICIAN

1. SUMMARY: IN CONVERSATION JULY 7, ABDULLAH YAFI SAID THAT MOSLEMS ARE WILLING CONCEDE PRESIDENCY TO MARONITES PROVIDED THERE IS BETTER "BALANCE" BETWEEN POWERS OF PRESIDENT AND PREMIER. HE ADDED, HOWEVER, THAT CONFESSIONALISM SHOULD EVENTUALLY BE ABOLISHED. THIS WAS THE DEMAND OF LEBANON'S YOUTH, AND IT MUST BE HONORED TO FORESTALL COMMUNIST TAKEOVER. ON LEBANESE-PALESTINIAN RELATIONS, YAFI BELIEVED LEBANESE CRISIS CAN BE SOLVED ONLY IN CONTEXT OF CONCESSIONS TO PALESTINIANS ABOUT PALESTINE. THEY MUST AT LEAST BE GIVEN PROMISE OF WEST BANK. OTHERWISE, THEY WILL NOT CEASE BEING A SOURCE OF TROUBLE IN LEBANON. HE WAS SHARPLY CRITICAL OF SYRIAN INTERVENTION, BUT SOLELY BECAUSE OF THE MANNER IN WHICH IT WAS CONDUCTED AND NOT BECAUSE THE INTERVENTION WAS IMPROPER PER SE. ASKED WHAT THE U.S. COULD DO TO CONTRIBUTE TO A SOLUTION, YAFI SAID THE U.S. SHOULD WAIT FOR A PROPER MOMENT BEFORE TAKING AN ACTIVE ROLE, BUT IT
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SHOULD CONTINUE REITERATING PUBLICLY ITS OPPOSITION TO PARTITION.

END SUMMARY.

2. I HAD DISCUSSION LASTING HOUR AND A HALF AFTERNOON JULY 7 WITH ABDULLAH YAFI, LONGSTANDING SUNNI POLITICAN AND FORMER PRIME MINISTER. MAIN PONTs WE COVERED WERE THE FOLLOWING:

(A) MOSLEM-CHRISTIAN RELATIONS. YAFI SAID THAT PART OF LEBANESE PROBLEM IS THAT THE MOSLEMS DO NOT KNOW EXACTLY WHAT THE CHRISTIANS WANT. MOSLEMS ARE WILLING TO CONCEDE THE PRESIDENCY TO THE MARONITES, EVEN THOUGHT THE MOSLEMS FORM A MAJORITY OF THE POPULATION. THE MOSLEM SIDE IS COMMITTED TO LEBANONESE INDEPENDENCE, HE SAID, AND REJECTS UNION WITH SURROUNDING MOSLEM WORLD.

(B) SUNNI MOSLEM ATTITUDES. YAFI DISPLAYED SOME UNHAPPINESS THAT TRADITIONAL SUNNI LEADERS ARE LARGELY BEING "IGNORED" IN THE EVOLVING LEBANESE CRISIS. IT IS STRANGE, HE SAID, THAT VARIOUS MEDIATORS CURRENTLY ON THE SCENE DO NOT CALL ON KARAME, EVEN THOUGH HE IS THE INCUMBENT PREMIER. WHEN I NOTED IN PASSING THAT THE MEDIATORS DO CALL ON KAMAL JUMBLATT, YAFI REPLIED SOMEWHAT BITTERLY THAT JUMBLATT HAS BEEN TAKEN OVER BY THE EXTREME LEFT AND DOES NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT MOSLEM OPINION. BUT, YAFI CONCEDED, JUNBLATT IS A "FIRST-CLASS MANEUVERER" AND MUST BE HANDLED CAREFULLY.

(C) CONFESSIONALISM. I ASKED YAFI WHETHER HE AGREED WITH THOSE WHO BELIEVE THAT CONFESSIONALISM SHOULD BE ABOLISHED IN LEBANON. HE FIRST REPLIED IN GUARDED FASHION, BUT THEN CAME DOWN STRONGLY ON THE BELIEF THAT CONFESSIONALISM SHOULD EVENTUALLY BE ELIMINATED. HE SAID THIS WAS THE DEMAND OF THE YOUTH OF LEBANON, AND THEIR DESIRE MUST BE SATISFIED. OTHERWISE, HE DECLARED, THE COMMUNISTS WILL GAIN POWER ONE DAY. YAFI MADE IT CLEAR THAT HE WAS OPPOSED TO COMMUNIST INFLUENCE AND EVEN THAT OF "EXAGGERATED SOCIALISM." CONTINUING IN THIS VEIN, YAFI SAID IT WOULD BE A GOOD IDEA IF ONE OR MORE POLITICAL PARITIES WERE FORMED AROUND YOUTH ON A NON-CONFESSIONAL BASIS. THIS REPRESENTS THE COURSE THAT LEBANON MUST FOLLOW IN THE FUTURE, HE THOUGHT. YAFI ALLUDED SEVERAL TIMES TO THE IMPROTANCE OF TURNING OVER LEADERSHIP TO THE YOUTH. THIS, IN ITSELF, HE FELT WOULD HELP OVERCOME THE TRADITIONAL ADHERENCE TO CONFESSIONALISM SINCE YOUNGER LEBANESE LEADERS ARE MORE SECULAR-MINDED.

(D) LEBANESE-PALESTINIAN RELATIONS. IN RESPONSE TO MY QUESTIONS ABOUT POSSIBLITY OF MODUS VIVENDI WITH PALESTINIANS AS ELEMENT
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IN SOLUTION, YAFI TOOK THEME THAT LEBANESE CRISIS CAN BE SOLVED ONLY IN CONTEXT OF CONCESSIONS TO PALESTINIANS ABOUT PALESTINE. THEY MUST AT LEAST BE GIVEN PROMISE OF WEST BANK. THE PALESTINIANS MUST SOMEHOW BECOME CONVINCED THAT A RETURN TO PALESTINE IS OPEN TO THEM BEFORE THEY WILL STOP BEING A SOURCE OF TROUBLE INEBANON.

(E) TERMS OF POSSIBLE SETTLEMENT. I ASKED YAFI IF FRANGI'S "BAABDA DOCUMENT" COULD STILL BE THR FRAMEWORK FOR A SETTLEMENT.

HE REPLIED THAT THIS FORMULA WAS "UNFORTUNATELY OVERTAKEN BY EVENTS." WHEN ASKED WHAT THE TERMS OF EVENTUAL SOLUTION SHOULD BE, YAFI REPEATED THAT THE PRESIDENCY COULD GO TO THE MARONITES, BUT THAT "BALANCE" BETWEEN THE PRESIDENCY AND THE PREMIERSHIP MUST BE STRUCK, GIVING THE SUNNI PREMIER GREATER POWER. YAFI ALSO BELIEVED STRONGLY THAT PRESIDENT FRANGIE MUST RESIGN QUICKLY. IN FACT, ONE OF THE PROBLEMS WAS THAT FRANGIE DID NOT RESIGN AT ONCE FOLLOWING THE ELCTION OF SARKIS. THE SYRIANS SHOULD HAVE FORCED HIM TO RESIGN. YAFI SPOKE BITTERLY ABOUT PRESIDENT FRANGIE SEVERAL TIMES DURING THE CONVERSATION, SAYING THAT A BETTER MAN SHOULD HAVE BEEN CHOSEN AT THE LAST PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION. YAFI NOTED THAT FRANGIE WON THAT ELECTION BY ONLY ONE VOTE. IN THIS CONNECTION, YAFI SPOKE APPROVINGLY OF PRESIDENT-ELECT SARKIS, SAYING PARTICULARLY THAT SARKIS SHOWED PROMISE OF DISPLAYING THE SAME MODERATION THAT HIS MENTOR PRESIDENT CHEHAB USED TO SHOW.

(F) PARTITION. I BROUGHT UP THE SUBJECT OF PARTITION AT ONE POINT, STATING THAT AMERICAN POLICY WAS OPPOSED TO THIS IDEA. I TOLD HIM THAT RUMORS OF AN AMERICAN PLOT TO FOSTER PARTITION WERE FOOLISH. YAFI APPEARED TO ACCEPT MY STATEMENT, AND WE JOKED ABOUT THE VARIOUS "PLOTS" WHICH PEOPLE OFTEN ACCUSE AMERICANS OF BEING INVOLVED IN. I ASKED WHEHTER HE THOUGHT CHRISTIANS AS A RULE FAVORED PARTITION. HE ANSWERED THAT CHAMOUN AND FRANGIE PROBABLY WANT IT, BUT THAT NON-MARONITE CHRISTIANS AND EVEN YOUNGER-GENERATION MARONITES DO NOT GO ALONG WITH THE SCHEME. HE SAID SARCASTICALLY THAT CHAMOUN AND FRANGIE ARE AT THE END OF THEIR POLITICAL LIFE AND ACT AS THOUGH THEY WANT TO BRING THE TEMPLE DOWN ON EVERYONE'S HEAD, NCLUDING THEIR OWN.

(G) SYRIAN INTERVENTION. WHILE REPEATING SEVERAL TIMES THAT HE WAS A VERY GOOD FRIEND OF SYRIAN PRESIDENT ASSAD, YAFI BELIEVED STRONGLY THAT ASSAD HAD MADE A MISTAKE IN HIS INTERVENTION IN LEBANON. IT WAS NOT THE PRINCIPLE OF SYRIAN INTERVENTION TO WHICH

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YAFI OBJECTED, EITHER POLITICAL OR MILITARY, BUT THE MANNER IN WHICH IT HAD BEEN CARRIED OUT. YAFI DECLARED THAT ASSAD HAD MADE THE MISTAKE OF INTERVENING LIKE A "MILITARY MAN" RATHER THAN A "POLITICIAN." INSTEAD OF LETTING THE LEBANESE KNOW THAT THEY WERE ENTERING AS IMPARTIAL PEACEMAKERS, THE SYRIANS CRUDELY ATTACKED THE PALESTINIAN AND MOSLEM SIDES. THEY SHOWED PARTIALITY TOWARDS THE MARONITES. THIS CREATED HOSTILITY AMONG MOSLEMS AND PALESTINIANS AND DOOMED THE INTERVENTION TO FAILURE. MOSLEM LEBANESE NOW CONSIDER THE SYRIANS AS "ENEMIES." ASKED WHY THE SYRIANS CHOSE TO INTERVENE IN THIS,

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USIA-06 OMB-01 ACDA-07 SAM-01 IO-13 /091 W

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P R 081052Z JUL 76

FM AMEMBASSY BEIRUT

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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 2 OF 2 BEIRUT 5991

MANNER, YAFI SPOKE ONLY OF A POSSIBLE ALAWITE-CHRISTIAN ALLIANCE AND A FEAR DAMASCUS MAY HAVE OF PALESTINIANS FREE-WHEELING IN LEBANON SO CLOSE TO SYRIA'S BORDERS. YAFI BELIEVED THAT ASSAD'S POLICY HAS MET WITH CONSIDERABLE OPPOSITION INSIDE SYRIA BUT HE NOTED THAT THERE HAD BEEN INTERNATL SYRIAN OPPOSITION TO ASSAD--WHICH HE CHARACTERIZED AS MISGUIDED--WELL BEFORE THE MILITARY INTERVENTION. THUS, WHILE HIS PRESTIGE IS COMMITTED TO THE POINT WHERE HE PROBABLY MUST CONTINUE THE INTERVENTION, ASSAD FACES THE DILEMMA OF INREASING DIFFICULTY AT HOME BECAUSE OF HIS LEBANON POLICY. I SUGGESTED THAT PERHAPS ASAD HAD BELIEVED A STRONG MILITARY INTERVENTION WOULD PROVIDE A NEEDED PSYCHOLIGICAL SHOCK TO THE LEBANEE. YAFI GENERALLY AGREED BUT ASSERTED THAT IT WAS IMPOSSIBLE TO IMPOSE A SOLUTION ON LEBANON, AS ASSAD HAD LEARNED TO HIS REGRET. A HEAVY-HANDED INTERVENTION SHOWS THE SEEDS OF ITS OWN FAILURE. I ASKED ALSO IF SYRIA WAS MOTIVATED BY ANY GRAND STRATEGY OF CREATING A GREATER SYRIA. YAFI REPLIED VAGUELY THAT PERHAPS THIS WAS SO, BUT HE SEEMED NOT TO BELIEVE THAT THIS WAS UPPERMOST IN ASSAD'S THINKING.

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(H) EGYPTIAN ROLE. I ASKED YAFI WHETHER HE THOUGHT PRESIDENT SADAT HAD ANY ROLE TO PLAY IN LEBANESE CRISIS. HE REPLIED MERELY THAT THIS IS A "GOOD MOMENT" FOR SADAT, BECAUSE THE SYRIAN "POLITICAIAN." INSTEAD OF LETTING THE LEBANESE KNOW THAT THEY WERE ENTERING AS IMPARTIAL PEACEMAKERS, THE SYRIANS CRUDELY ATTACKED THE PALESTINIAN AND MOSLEM SIDES. THEY SHOWED PARTIALITY TOWARDS THE MARONITES. THIS CREATED HOSTILITY AMONG MOSLEMS AND PALESTINIANS AND DOOMED THE INTERVENTION TO FAILURE. MOSLEM LEBANESE NOW CONSIDER THE SYRIANS AS "ENEMIES." ASKED WHY THE SYRIANS CHOSE TO INTERVENE IN THIS MANNER, YAFI SPOKE ONLY OF A POSSIBLE ALWITE-CHRISTIAN ALLIANCE AND A FEAR DAMASCUS MAY HAVE OF PALESTINIANS FREE-WHEELING IN LEBANON SO CLOSE TO SYRIA'S BORDERS. YAFI BELIEVED THAT ASSAD'S POLICY HAS MET WITH CONSIDERABLE OPPOSITION INSIDE SYRIA BUT HE NOTED THAT THERE HAD BEEN INTERNAL SYRIAN OPPOSITION TO ASSAD--WHICH HE CHARACTERIZED AS MISGUIDED--WELL BEFORE THE MILITARY INTERVENTION. THUS, WHILE HIS PRESTIGE IS COMMITTED TO THE POINT WHERE HE PROBABLY MUST CONTINUE THE INTERVENTION, ASSAD FACES THE DILEMMA OF INCREASING DIFFICULTY AT HOME BECAUSE OF HIS LEBANON POLICY. I SUGGESTED THAT PERHAPS ASSAD HAD BELIEVED A STRONG MILITARY INTERVENTION WOULD PROVIDE A NEEDED PSYCHOLOGICAL SHOCK TO THE LEBANESE. YAFI GENERALLY AGREED BUT ASSERTED THAT IT WAS IMPOSSIBLE TO IMPOSE A SOLUTION ON LEBANON, AS ASSAD HAD LEARNED TO HIS REGRET. A HEAVY-HANDED INTERVENION SOWS THE SEEDS OF ITS OWN FAILURE. I ASKED ALSO IF SYRIA WAS MOTIVATED BY GRAND STRATEGY OF CREATING A GREATER SYRIA. YAFI REPLIED VAGUELY THAT PERHAPS THIS WAS SO, BUT HE SEEMED NOT TO BELIEVE THAT THIS WAS UPPERMOST IN ASSAD'S THINKING.

(H) EGYPTIAN ROLE. I ASKED YAFI WHETHER HE THOUGHT PRESIDENT SADAT HAD ANY ROLE TO PLAY IN LEBANESE CRISIS. HE REPLIED MRERELY THAT THIS IS A "GOOD MOMENT" FOR SADAT, BECAUSE THE SYRIAN INTERVENTION IS EBBING. YAFI THEN TOOK THE OCCASION TO EXPOUND HIS CRITICISM OF LAST YEAR'S SINAI ACCORD, SAYING THAT SADAT SUBMITTED TO LANGUAGE IN THAT AGREEMENT REMINISCENT OF THE "FRENCH MANDATE." YAFI SEEMED TO FEEL THAT THE AGREEMENT WAS A DISGRACE TO THE ARAB SIDE. ALL IN ALL, IT WAS UNCLEAR WHAT ROLE YAFI FELT EGYPT COULD PLAY IN LEBANON, BUT HE LEFT THE IMPRESSION THAT HE WAS AS SUSPICIOUS OF EGYPTIAN INVOLVEMENT AS HE AS OF SYRIAN.

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(I) POSSIBLE U.S. ROLE. I ASKED YAFI WHAT HE THOUGHT UNITED STATES COULD DO TO CONTRIBUTE TO A SOLUTION. WITHOUT HESITATION, HE SAID THERE IS NOTHING THE U.S. CAN DO NOW, BECAUSE ANY ACTIVE ROLE WOULD BE MISUNDERSTOOD BY ONE PARTY OR ANOTHER. THE U.S. MUST WAIT FOR A PROPER MOMENT. NEVERTHELESS, THE U.S. SHOULD CONTINUE TO REITERATE PUBLICPY ITS OPPOSITION TO PARTITION IN THE

HOPE THIS MIGHT DISABUSE THOSE WHO BELIEVE TO THE CONTRARY

3. COMMENTS. YAFI CAME THROUGH AS A CHARMING MAN FULL OF GOOD SENSE MIXED WITH A BIT OF ARAB IRRATIONALITY (WITNESS HIS VIEW OF THE SINAI ACCORD). HE WAS MORE MODERATE IN HIS OPINIONS THAN I HAD EXPECTED. PERHAPS AS AN OLD-TIME SUNNI POLITICAN HE FINDS THAT HE NOW OCCUPIES THE CENTER OF THE SPECTRUM, LESS BECAUSE HE HAS CHANGED THAN BECAUSE THE SPECTRUM ITSELF HAS SHIFTED TO THE LEFT. WHILE DISPLAYING CLEARLY OLD-GENERATION OPINIONS, HE SEEMS TO BE MAKING AN EFFORT TO BEND WITH TIMES. HIS VIEWS ON CONFESSIONALISM ARE A CASE IN POINT, FOR THOUGH MAN OF HIS ANSWERS REVEAL AN ADHERENCE TO SUNNI PREROGATIVES AGAINST THE MAROINTES, HE NEVERTHELESS HAS REACHED THE CONCLUSION THAT CONFESSIONALISM EVENTUALLY MUST GO.

4. TWO SPECIFIC POINTS IN THIS CONVERSATION ARE INTERSTING. ONE IS YAFI'S INSISTENCE ON A SOLUTION TO THE PALESTINE PROBLEM AS A NECESSARY ELEMENT IN A LEBANESE SETTLEMENT. HE WOULD NOT BUY THE IDEA I THREW OUT THAT A MODUS VIVENDI MIGHT BE POSSIBLE BETWEEN LEBANESE AND PALESTINIANS PENDING A SOLUTION FOR PALESTINE. SECONDLY, HE KEPT STRESSING HIS FRIENDSHIP WITH PRESIDENT ASSAD AND HIS BELIEF THAT THE SYRIANS WENT WRONG NOT IN INTERVENING PER SE, BUT IN THE WAY THEY WENT ABOUT IT. THIS IMPLIES THAT, IN YAFI'S VIEW, SYRIA IS NOT PRECLUDED FROM PLAYING A ROLE OF SOME KIND IN A SETTLEMENT.
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Message Attributes

Automatic Decaptioning: X
Capture Date: 01 JAN 1994
Channel Indicators: n/a
Current Classification: UNCLASSIFIED
Concepts: PERSONAL OPINION, POLITICAL SETTLEMENT, CIVIL DISORDERS, POLITICAL SITUATION
Control Number: n/a
Copy: SINGLE
Draft Date: 08 JUL 1976
Decaption Date: 01 JAN 1960
Decaption Note:
Disposition Action: RELEASED
Disposition Approved on Date:
Disposition Authority: KelleyW0
Disposition Case Number: n/a
Disposition Comment: 25 YEAR REVIEW
Disposition Date: 28 MAY 2004
Disposition Event:
Disposition History: n/a
Disposition Reason:
Disposition Remarks:
Document Number: 1976BEIRUT05991
Document Source: CORE
Document Unique ID: 00
Drafter: n/a
Enclosure: n/a
Executive Order: GS
Errors: N/A
Film Number: D760264-0632
From: BEIRUT
Handling Restrictions: n/a
Image Path:
ISecure: 1
Legacy Key: link1976/newtext/t19760781/aaaactah.tel
Line Count: 303
Locator: TEXT ON-LINE, ON MICROFILM
Office: ACTION NEA
Original Classification: CONFIDENTIAL
Original Handling Restrictions: n/a
Original Previous Classification: n/a
Original Previous Handling Restrictions: n/a
Page Count: 6
Previous Channel Indicators: n/a
Previous Classification: CONFIDENTIAL
Previous Handling Restrictions: n/a
Reference: n/a
Review Action: RELEASED, APPROVED
Review Authority: KelleyW0
Review Comment: n/a
Review Content Flags:
Review Date: 21 APR 2004
Review Event:
Review Exemptions: n/a
Review History: RELEASED <21 APR 2004 by CunninFX>; APPROVED <17 AUG 2004 by KelleyW0>
Review Markings:

Margaret P. Grafeld
Declassified/Released
US Department of State
EO Systematic Review
04 MAY 2006

Review Media Identifier:
Review Referrals: n/a
Review Release Date: n/a
Review Release Event: n/a
Review Transfer Date:
Review Withdrawn Fields: n/a
Secure: OPEN
Status: NATIVE
Subject: CONVERSATION WITH ABDULLAH HAFI, SUNNI POLITICIAN
TAGS: PINS, PINT, PFOR, LE, (HAFI, ABDULLAH)
To: STATE
Type: TE
Markings: Margaret P. Grafeld Declassified/Released US Department of State EO Systematic Review 04 MAY 2006